

BRIEF

TOWARDS A NATO CHINA
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| UNA ALEKSANDRA BĒRZIŅA-ČERENKOVA |

In the coming decade, NATO's search for a common, cohesive strategy towards China is among the challenges most likely to reveal deep fractures between the positions of the Allies. Paradoxically, the impact on the present security system of Xi Jinping's great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is of such global significance that it, most of all, requires such a common strategy—or at the very least a shared understanding of the dos and don'ts of engaging with China. The main reason is that China's technological advance increasingly impinges on the security domain. The controversy surrounding 5G networks is a vivid example—China's participation in building 5G networks is considered to be such a direct threat to the Alliance that some experts have advised NATO to "count a portion of excess nation spending on secure 5G infrastructure towards its 2 percent defense spending goals."¹

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A joint political strategy would require a "shared threat perception" among NATO member states.² However, the Allies' opinions on international affairs often diverge—as one group of experts has noted, NATO "faces internal challenges. Tensions have escalated in the Eastern Mediterranean between NATO members Greece and Turkey. Turkey and France are supporting different sides in the Libyan civil war."³ In order to map the differences and similarities that could shape the attitude of NATO vis-a-vis China in the coming decade, this policy brief examines official positions on China's global role, and the relationships with China of Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the

Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, the UK, the US (Allies whose nationals were included in the group of experts appointed by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg to support his #NATO2030 reflection process) and of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In seeking evidence for the topics seen by Allies as most relevant to their relations with China, and their attitudes towards China, transatlanticism in general and NATO's policy towards China in particular, I have reviewed official national foreign and security policy strategies, recent addresses by key political figures, and analytical publications.⁴ Nations differ in their approaches to foreign policy communication and in some cases the availability of open sources is limited. While the

documents reviewed by no means comprise an exhaustive list, and while public statements may not necessarily reflect detailed policy positions, this type of content analysis should nonetheless allow for a useful comparison of national positions and priorities.

ALLIES' PERSPECTIVES

All the countries examined acknowledge China's growing significance and influence on the global order, but the degree of concern over this development differs, as does the way it is expressed. Poland, for example, hints—but not by name—at the growing weight of China, noting

merely that "certain Asian countries will increasingly aspire to exert influence on the world order."⁵ Turkey, meanwhile, according to a book review in a journal published by the Center for Strategic Research of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recognises the "increasing significance of Russia and China in Turkish foreign policy", and seems ready to embrace China's growing role as "Turkish foreign policy has increasingly gravitated toward Eurasia."⁶

The Allies' different regional priorities, rooted in historic and geographic factors, are quite visible in their security policies and statements. While China's military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region are, for example, seen as an issue by France, the Netherlands, and the UK, they do not seem to matter to other Allies, including the Baltic states and Poland. China's growing presence in the Arctic, on the other hand, apparently matters to Canada and Denmark, and is also mentioned as one of Latvia's foreign policy concerns, but does not attract interest across the board. Neither, contrary to what might be expected, is China's investment in European infrastructure viewed as an overarching concern, mentioned in the documents reviewed only in the context of the Netherlands, the UK, Poland and Latvia—and then in neutral or even optimistic tones. Several Allies cite the use of cyber tools, including those of Chinese origin, by various non-state and state actors as a threat to NATO in the coming decade (Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK name China explicitly in this regard; Estonia, Germany and Canada include an implicit mention).

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The US, reflecting a growing focus on the Indo-Pacific region over several administrations, is the Ally most ready to label China as a direct threat. During the Trump administration the US has named Chinese (and Russian) revisionism as the central challenge to US prosperity and security, a bipartisan stance unlikely to be softened by the incoming Biden team.⁷ US voices have also been the most prominent in calling for a NATO response to the challenge of China.⁸

More broadly, most nations (except France and Turkey) reiterate the fundamental importance of the transatlantic link for their national security. Many Allies' statements are critical of the Trump administration's 'America First' policy—for example, Denmark and the UK—but nevertheless acknowledge the necessity of the transatlantic link and the centrality of the US in European security. Others criticise the US in certain fields (protectionism, personal data protection legislation) but these criticisms do not translate into a broad anti-transatlantic stance. French President Emmanuel Macron is most scathing in his characterisation of the differences between Europe and the US, telling a conference of Ambassadors, for example, that, "the United States of America are in the western camp, but they do not carry the same humanism. Their sensitivity towards climate issues, equality, social balance that matter to us does not exist in the same way."⁹ France's loud call for European autonomy is not echoed at all by the smaller European nations. But rhetoric aside, the EU is still considering its own common position on China, which may too become a source of transatlantic frustration as it contributes to policy shaping by 21 of the 28 European Allies.

Given their emphasis on the indispensability of transatlantic link for security, and the view of many that China is problematic from a national security point of view, it would seem reasonable to expect that most Allies would also be in favour of a transatlantic (i.e. NATO) approach to China. But on this, the Allies are much less vocal. Only Lithuania explicitly calls for a "Euro-Atlantic" approach to China ("China seeks to change the existing international order and tailor it for its own needs. Therefore, together with our Euro-Atlantic partners, we need to work on a common response").¹⁰ Turkey's soft approach to China as a part of its own pivot to Eurasia seems to occupy the other end of the spectrum: "...the clash of interests between Turkey and the West is one of the major factors that prompted Turkey to try to soft-balance its traditional NATO allies by developing political and economic ties with Eurasian countries."¹¹

It is perhaps then unsurprising that, despite US pressure, NATO leaders have issued only the most cautious of public statements about their

collective approach to China.¹² The experts appointed to support the Secretary General's #NATO2030 reflection process have been somewhat more robust, calling for NATO to "devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China ... infuse the China challenge throughout existing structures ... and monitor and defend against any Chinese activities that could impact collective defence, military readiness or resilience in the SACEUR Area of Responsibility."¹³

It also appears from their public statements that the countries analysed are keen to avoid walking back their existing partnerships with China, but for the most part underlining that values are non-negotiable. Formulations range from the explicit, for example Canada, which states, "We will seek to develop stronger relationships with other countries in the region, particularly China," to the skilfully obscure, as in the Estonian case: "We are also looking for new opportunities to cooperate with global power centres while remaining true to our values."¹⁴ Positive positions towards China have not always found favour with the US, as Italy discovered during a 2020 visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who reportedly sought "to contain Chinese ambitions in Italy, a trusted ally of the US and a founding member both of the European Union and of NATO"—this hard US line coming despite Italy's apparent readiness to raise sensitive issues such as Hong Kong with Chinese counterparts.¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

While in their public statements Allies subscribe to several common thoughts regarding the scope of the West's approaches to China, for example on the need for an ongoing conversation including on human rights issues, they generally have little to say on possible NATO roles. Nonetheless, there are themes evident in the positions of most Allies that NATO might seek to build on in developing a medium-term approach to China. These include broad ideas such as a concern over China's growing significance on the world stage and influence on the global order, and a commitment to the transatlantic link as a cornerstone of national security—which,

together, might argue for the development of some sort of transatlantic response. They also refer to more specific items that are traditionally the concern of NATO, such as the use of cyber tools, including those of Chinese origin, as a threat in the coming decade—which might justify a NATO response.

On the other hand, there are discrepancies between national positions. The clearest advocate of a Euro-Atlantic China policy is Lithuania, while Turkey's position is China-accommodating and self-reliant. France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK underscore the positive aspects of a relationship with China, including opportunities for economic growth and cooperation to fight climate change. Other Allies are less welcoming.

As would be expected, the Baltic states and Poland demonstrate a strong transatlantic emphasis, whereas Germany and—most notably—France call for a higher degree of European self-reliance.

Lastly, Allies concentrate on issues that have high domestic priority and tend to downplay issues that may impact NATO as a whole, as long as they do not matter to them nationally. China's

When it comes to a joint NATO approach to China, the Allies are much less vocal

presence in the Indo-Pacific understandably matters to France, for example, but not to Denmark. In the case of China's role in the Arctic, the situation is reversed.

Overall, while common themes exist, marked differences between the positions of clusters of Allies suggest that, despite the prominence it has been given in the #NATO2030 group of experts report, deciding how to deal with China will be a difficult issue for NATO's adaptation agenda. Certainly, a great deal of discussion among the Allies will be required if common concerns such as cyber are to be turned into policy, and if the Alliance as a whole is to be persuaded to react to the regional concerns of some Allies, such as China's military presence in the Indo-Pacific and Arctic.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lindsay P. Gorman, [A Future Internet for Democracies. Contesting China's Push for Dominance in 5G, 6G, and the Internet of Everything](#) (Washington DC: The Alliance for Securing Democracy at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020), 41.
- ² Transatlantic Task Force, [Together or Alone? Choices and Strategies for Transatlantic Relations for 2021 and Beyond](#) (Washington DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020), 34.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ I am grateful for the help provided by colleagues, including T. Dams, J. Szczudlik, T. Rühlig, A. Ekman, M. Lauder, B. Ozkan, in searching for the most relevant national sources. In addition to those documents cited in the text, the analysis draws on: "[Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations](#)," Government of Canada, 21 February 2020; "[Integrated International Security Strategy 2018-2022](#)," Government of the Netherlands, 14 May 2018; "[Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the German Presidency of the Council of the EU 2020 to the European Parliament in Brussels on 8 July 2020](#)," The Federal Chancellor, 8 July 2020; "[Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament \(Saeima\), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 23 January 2020](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Latvia), 24 January 2020; "[New Danish Foreign and Security Policy Strategy](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark; "[The Netherlands and China: a new balance](#)," Government of the Netherlands, 15 May 2019; "[UK foreign policy in a shifting world order. 5th Report of Session 2017-19](#)," House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations, United Kingdom Parliament, 18 December 2018; *White Paper 2016 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Berlin: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2016); Federal Government (Germany), [Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific](#) (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, 2020).
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- ⁶ Furkan Emer, "Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order," Book review, *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs* 25:1 (Spring-Summer 2020), 147-150.
- ⁷ Department of Defense, "[Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States](#)," January 2018, 2; Raissa Robles, "[Joe Biden won't soften US stance on South China Sea, experts say](#)," South China Morning Post, November 9, 2020.
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- ⁹ "[Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la Conférence des Ambassadeurs](#) [Speech by the President of the Republic at the conference of ambassadors]," Élysée, 27 August 2019.
- ¹⁰ "[Speech by President Gitanas Nausėda at the Annual Lithuanian Foreign Policy Conference](#)," President of the Republic of Lithuania, December 12, 2019.
- ¹¹ "Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia", 148.
- ¹² "We recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance." NATO, "[London Declaration](#), issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019," Press Release (2019) 115, 4 December 2019, paragraph 6.
- ¹³ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General," November 2020, 12.
- ¹⁴ Department of National Defence (Canada), [Strong, Secure, Engaged Canada's Defence Policy](#) (Department of National Defence, 2017), 92; "[Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu at the Parliament of Estonia \(Riigikogu\) at the discussion of Estonia's Foreign Policy Strategy 2030 on 19 May 2020](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Estonia), 19 May 2020.
- ¹⁵ Nicola Casarini, "[Italy's China card: Finance, trade and geopolitics](#)," Chatham House, October 30, 2020; "[Chinese FM Wang Yi Meets with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio](#)," CGTN live, Facebook, August 25, 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

UNA ALEKSANDRA BĒRZIŅA-ČERENKOVA

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova is the Head of the New Silk Road Programme at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

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